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ABSTRACT

Because the aesthetic mode of functioning is the basic mode of human functioning, children's works are aesthetic and expressive. As a fundamental activity, the aesthetic mode can be seen in children's written and visual works, in all types of construction and play behavior, and in the more personally physical aspects of gesture and tone in an individual. In the process of treating children's works as aesthetic, such works can be studied, interacted with, observed, and reflected upon. Alternate approaches that weaken or deny the individual import of the work and the child are counterproductive. These approaches include the deficit approach to children's art or writing, the diagnostic method of interpreting children's psychological states through their art, and the developmental approach, which assigns an individual to a point on a developmental continuum. To understand the individual expressiveness of a piece of children's work or children's play, the limitations and biases of these approaches must be avoided. Four characteristics of the aesthetic mode which support and explain its fundamental position in the way human beings function are the centrality of the aesthetic in the act of human perception, its origin in pleasure, its interactive quality, and its expressive quality. Since a child's works are both aesthetic and expressive, they are, for the classroom teacher, valuable sources of insight into the child and his or her world. (RH)

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by

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The Primal Mode of Aesthetics in Children's Work and Play

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Three faculty at the Center for Teaching and Learning have been involved in a research project which has given us a new perspective on "the aesthetic" as it relates to children's work and lives as well as our own as teachers and human beings.

Starting out by considering the "aesthetic mode" of functioning as a major method of discovering and arranging meaning, we have come to the belief that the aesthetic is the major mode of human functioning and that a study of children's works rewards us by allowing us to see the individual human being in its expressiveness.

Dr. Beth Franklin, Dr. Deanna Strackbein, and I have been focusing on a few of the children whose visual and written works are contained within the Prospect Archives at UND, a collection of works by 32 children over a span of up to eight years of their school lives. We have been studying these works through the method of "reflective observation" (associated primarily with Patricia Carini of The Prospect School), mixed with the approach of "aesthetic reading" (suggested by Louise Rosenblatt in individual articles and in her 1978 The Reader, The Text, The Poem) and, indeed, the general approach of describing and thinking that characterizes almost any critic's method of dealing with material.

Our research agenda was (1) to begin to treat children's works of writing and art as aesthetic and expressive works, (2) in order to understand their qualities as expressive of that child, and (3) to be able to return to more of the child's works and the child him/herself on the basis of that enriched understanding. Our recent presentations have focused on one or two particular children and their works, but I want here to elaborate on the central issue that has come to have an increasing importance for both our thinking and our practice.

We have come to believe that children's works are aesthetic and expressive because the aesthetic mode of functioning is the basic mode of human functioning. In the art of child play and child work we encounter this primal mode of perception, a way of approaching and understanding the world which is pre-scientific and pre-artistic in the developed meanings of those words as well as fundamental to the highest elaborations of science and art. Children's works are aesthetic and, as such, they can be studied, interacted with, observed, and reflected upon. As expressive works, they show us an intersection of the child and the world, giving us knowledge about both. As a fundamental activity, the aesthetic mode can be seen in all types of construction and play behavior as well as the more personally physical aspects of gesture and "tone" of the individual, but our work has been primarily concerned with an individual child's written and visual works.

Non-Aesthetic Approaches And Their Consequences

Many people, including researchers, teachers, and parents, attempt to see the child in the

child's work, but there are approaches which, we believe, are counter-productive. Indeed, in treating children's works as aesthetic and expressive we were, in part, responding to these other ways of approaching such work, ways that weaken or deny the individual import of the work and the child. It is important, then, that I set out first what we were not doing, and briefly critique the non-aesthetic approaches.

There is, first, the DEFICIT approach to children's art or writing which draws attention to what the child does not do, such as not including hands in a drawing or what we English teachers like to call "detail" in a story. But the fact that certain drawing or language skills may not be present in a particular work is unimportant to what the work actually is, to what it does present for our attention. If a child's painting, in our own research, showed us unrealistically round human figures, for example, we dealt with the aesthetic and expressive significance of round human figures rather than the absence of conventionally realistic figures. A person who views and judges any work of art in terms of what it does not include--for example, the fact that it is non-representational--is not in touch with the work itself. To focus on the "deficits" of a drawing or story tells us nothing about that work; such a reading is "non-aesthetic" and will not allow us to discover the expressiveness it actually contains.

A second approach to children's writing and art found in both professional practice and amateur reactions is the DIAGNOSTIC method. In its professional application, this approach attempts to diagnose psychological states of children through their art as in the House-Tree-Person or Draw-A-Person tests. The children's works are then judged according to pre-established norms, including such questionable assumptions as that "shading" in a picture is an indication of anxiety, or that a knothole in a tree symbolizes a trauma in the child's life.

It should be apparent that such tests stress a conventionally accepted norm and interpret deviation as indication of a problem, no matter what the deviation. Thus, a head that is "too small" for the body theoretically represents a child's anxiety about his/her own ability to think while a head that is "too large" for the body represents the same anxiety. Clearly this is a non-aesthetic approach to an aesthetic product.

This tendency to psychologize a child's work is evident in reactions from parents and teachers who react upon the basis of conventional or stereotyped assumptions. A picture of flowers and trees may be seen as "nice," indicating a child's happiness and normality, whereas a picture of a burning house is viewed as "not nice," indicating anxiety or destructiveness or a problem-oriented attitude. I was at a presentation recently which involved children's art; a drawing was flashed on a screen and in one second the person behind me gasped and noted to a companion that the child was psychologically "at risk." Such quickly stereotypical reactions have no place in truly viewing a child's work as aesthetic and expressive.

Even seasoned, well-meaning teachers may fall into this trap but it is surely a tendency we have observed among preservice teachers. They are, at first, horrified by stories which contain witches eating people or tigers that devour whole families, just as they are disturbed by children's drawings of monsters and ogres, seeing these as signs of the child's troubled nature.

Whatever the connection between the child's product and the child's inner life, it cannot be so simply and quickly discovered, nor does an art product lend itself to either "scientifically" pre-established criteria or popular assumptions. What the connection between the child's life and art actually is will be discussed in the section of "expressiveness" later in this paper.

The third approach which moves to deny individual import to works of writing and art is the DEVELOPMENTAL approach. This mode of inquiry sees individual children's work as representing growth along a pre-established line of development. Although it is obvious that one develops in skill and perception in all activities of life, an emphasis on the developmental approach to children's work freezes a child's product within a category and ends the search for meaning. One has "identified" something about that work, one has placed it within a category, and one ends the search.

It is, of course, quite possible to find levels of moral, cognitive, manipulative, or language development in children's work, just as it is possible to find individual or cultural developmental stages in adult work such as Hamlet or Beowulf. But if our attention is drawn to that aspect and remains there, we are not seeing the work as aesthetic and expressive in its own right. The sense of justice in Beowulf, for example, is just that, and it must be accepted within the work in order for it to have an aesthetic/expressive effect upon us. One can certainly treat the poem as a document of a particular stage of civilization, but one has then ceased to regard it as an aesthetic object.

To fix a child's drawings at a certain level of development--because figures, for example, appear to be floating in air without a realistic grounding--is to have discovered nothing about the aesthetic/expressive nature of those floating figures. One could then shrug aside the work of Marc Chagall who utilized a similar technique in his own art. Whether by sophisticated choice in the case of the adult artist, or by naive intuition in the case of the child, the painting gives us, as an aesthetic work, "floating figures" and they have an aesthetic effect.

I may be repeating myself, but I want to be clear. Children do develop as artists and writers just as they and we develop as speakers, scientists, musicians, and civic-minded citizens. But to attempt to understand their work only as presenting a point of development along a general line is not to experience the uniqueness of the individual work, the aesthetic/expressive qualities of that work considered in and of itself.

In any attempt to understand the individual expressiveness of a piece of children's work or play, therefore, we have to avoid the limitations and biases of the deficit, the diagnostic, and the developmental approaches.

The Aesthetic Mode

In order to treat children's writing and art as aesthetic/expressive, we need to understand the meaning and application of these terms. I want to identify four characteristics of the aesthetic mode which support and explain its fundamental position in how we function as human beings, both as adults and as children: the centrality of the aesthetic in the act of human perception, its origin in pleasure, its interactive quality, and its expressive quality.

Let me begin by simply introducing some familiar scenes, some examples of what I will later call the aesthetic mode of perception, a mode which underlies our experience in the world from the simplest play to the most advanced work.

As a child in Colorado, I played beside a mountain stream, piling up rocks to form a "dam," and enjoying the effect of my own construction, the deepening of the backed-up water as well as its changed course, surging over and around the rocks. No parent instructed me on how to build a dam or, indeed, even suggested I build it, and the frequency of such an activity by children suggests that it is a natural and spontaneous reaction to that environmental situation.

This example is quite similar to a child playing with blocks where we can observe experimental attempts to stack, to arrange, and to balance. Some blocks stay in equilibrium; others topple, following another course. With no need for direction, the child constructs and enjoys both the process of the construction and its product.

I observed another example of this kind of activity when I saw a young boy waiting outside a building for his father. The entrance offered a post and a gradually rising curb of concrete. The boy passed the time by putting himself in every conceivable posture afforded by that particular piece of the environment. He swung himself around the post at varying speeds and at varying heights. He walked, and then hopped, up the curbing and down. He walked up as far as he could with one foot on the rising concrete and one foot on the ground. He slid, he tiptoed, he climbed, he swung. He explored the relationships between these parts of his environment and his own physical body.

Other examples of such child-play abound in my experience and in your own. Who has not experienced the pleasure, as a child, of putting one's hand out of the window of a moving car and "playing" with the force of rushing air by trying to hold the hand flat, or lifting it slowly up from the horizontal to feel it pushed upright by the force of the wind? Such an activity is a spontaneous "game," a play and an enjoyment of that play in the interaction between the physical world and our physical selves.

We can observe the same play-like quality in more elaborated games, of course. Games provide a limited environment of space and materials as well as assumptions for behavior which function as rules with which the individual interacts, whether it is the larger muscular movement of throwing stones or snowballs at a target or the finer manipulative skills of jacks.

This is equally true, of course, of adult games, each with their own unique environment providing opportunities for human interaction. Golf gives one a chance to perform skillfully within a broad, passive, and leisurely paced environment; racquetball does the same with a narrow, responsive, and quickly paced environment. Team-oriented sports are not an exception to this, adding only the element of teamwork and the pleasure of extending one's own interaction with the environment onto one's teammates.

The same is true of what might be called "higher games"--the professions, the arts, the sciences. The enjoyment of the qualities of golf is--no matter how different in degree or intensity or "value"--similar to the enjoyment of a

scientist constructing a complicated formula, an artist intensely concentrating on a particular form, or the endeavors of a social scientist in discerning a trend in the data.

It is, to put it another way, the sense of aesthetic play which gives rise to both the development of science and of art. In a child's apparently casual interaction with stones and stream is found the origin of the engineering science required to construct the massive technological achievement of Hoover Dam, as well as the artistic vision of Robert Smithson's famous piece of earth-art, "Spiral Jetty," a curving path of rocks, gravel, and dirt that curls out into the Great Salt Lake and back.

This common aesthetic origin explains the "art" of science, for Hoover Dam gives, along with its practical uses, a massive architectural impact. This common origin also explains the "science" of art, as Smithson did not simply and impulsively throw stones into a lake but relied on practical ways of building a durable jetty. Smithson's project, as a matter of fact, illustrates the "play" element of both science and art. In helping to build "Spiral Jetty," the truck drivers are reported to have experienced a certain competitive glee in the challenge of backing their trucks onto a narrow spiral of land without going into the water, a combination of skill and the pleasure of exercising it which returns us almost directly to child play.

The literature of creativity has often spoken of the connection between apparently diverse forms of activity such as poetry and mathematics regarding the intuition, creativity, and "play" involved in both. This connection is no mere oddity of human experience, although it is sometimes treated that way. It outlines for us a fundamental continuity of human experience in the world, a continuity based, as I will argue, on an aesthetic approach to the world that is fundamental and pervasive in human life.

The following pages will develop the nature of this aesthetic mode by showing its centrality in human experience, its origin in human pleasure, its interactive function between the human and the world, and its expressive quality which allows us to see ourselves and others through its products.

The Centrality of the Aesthetic Mode

Remembering the above examples of "play" which run from a child's construction efforts beside a stream to the play of physicists exploring their own particular environment, let us examine what some other authors have pointed out about this characteristic.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his essay "The Child's Relations with Others," says that there is something <u>prior</u> to what have been called the functions of cognition such as intelligence, imagination, or even perception. This prior activity is, he says, "a function of organizing experiences" which gives configuration and equilibrium to those experiences. (Merleau-Ponty, 99) Can we not see in a child's play with blocks the functioning of a desire to "organize experiences" with those blocks, to see which will fall and which will stay, to discover the <u>nature</u> of blocks by attempting to organize them?

Malcolm Ross, the British aesthetics educator, refers to this function when he asserts that child play is born from a spontaneous

drive "to explore, investigate, manipulate, alter and, above all, order." (emphasis added) This impulse, he points out, both makes and discovers order and is, he concludes, "quintessentially aesthetic." (Ross, 9)

One or another of Ross' verbs may be present in any given activity, of course. Perhaps the feel of the rushing wind against one's hand is an example of investigating; the pleasure of a formal game may derive from a desire to manipulate, to show skill; the dam of rocks in a stream may show the concept of altering more clearly; and the stacking of blocks or the discovery of a chemical formula that "fits" and "balances" with the facts shows us the aspect of ordering. Nevertheless, Ross' interpretation of the word "aesthetic" accords with all of the activities we've been discussing.

Edith Cobb, in The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood, coins an even stronger word. She sees in the play behavior of young children a connection between child and nature, an engagement between the two in what she calls a "bioaesthetic striving." This striving is, she claims, "fundamental to the fulfillment of individual biological development." (Cobb, 16)

Cobb's work is important for us, both because of its stress on the interactiveness of the aesthetic mode, which I will discuss later, and because of its emphasis on the inescapably physical, biological origins of this mode.

Viewed in the light of the examples I introduced, Merleau-Ponty's experience-organizing function, Ross' spontaneous aesthetic drive, and Cobb's bioaesthetic striving can be seen as different terms for this fundamental mode of functioning.

I hope the case for the centrality of the aesthetic mode in human experience has at least been suggested: it exists prior to cognition, it seems to be a spontaneous drive to alter and order, and it is deeply connected to human development.

I now need to discuss the three remaining characteristics in more detail in order to indicate the nature of the aesthetic mode: its origins in pleasure which assure us of a humanistic continuum of development, its interactive nature which assures us of its ability to provide a holistic perspective on human experience, and its expressiveness which assures us we will be able to "read" ourselves and others by examining aesthetic expressive works.

The Origin of the Aesthetic Mode in Pleasure

Part of the "naturalness" of the aesthetic mode, its spontaneous and pervasive nature, is that it originates in pleasure. Indeed, as an element of "play," there can be no other motivation. We find pleasure in interacting with specific parts of our environment whether we are casually experimenting with the many uses of a stick and a ball--batting it, rolling it, hitting it along the ground--or playing according to the developed rules of baseball or hockey.

Edith Cobb sees a sense of "wonder" as the main motivating force in childhood. This wonder permits a response of the nervous system to the universe, she says, "that incites the mind to organize novelty of pattern and form out of incoming information." (Cobb, 27) Cobb finds a "spiritual elation and response to nature as the generic mark of all mankind" and sees this

elation and response in early childhood. (Cobb, 39)

It is important that Cobb's words not be taken in any rarefied sense. As the aesthetic mode is a fundamental concept, it is important to be fundamentally commonplace about it as well. Her "nature" is not some vaguely pantheistic presence in rocks and trees; it includes the world of buildings and blocks as well. "Elation" and "wonder" may seem to be high phrases, but we must remember that "it's just fun" is another variant of these emotions.

Remembering the block-stacking activities of children, one can see the child's mind incited to organize pattern and form. My dam was a natural and spontaneous reaction to the qualities of water and stone in that environment. This incitement, this "attract-ive" quality, comes from the pleasure involved, whether primarily spiritual, intellectual, emotional, or physical. We may need to remember that the Greek term aesthetikos was rooted in the senses, in that which is available to the sensory modes of the human being. This physical interplay and pleasure can be frequently seen in children, just as the more specialized mental pleasures of scientific and artistic work, for example, can be seen in the adult.

Not all pleasure is excitement, of course. It is easy to find a child playing rather diffidently, just as an adult might "toy" with a particular task of work or play; but in the absence of other motivation, pleasure must be deduced. On the other hand, so intense is this pleasure at times that it overrides other considerations. The artist or scientist goes without sleep in the grip of this pleasure; the small child comes in from playing in the snow, exhausted, shivering, cold--and happy.

This same pleasure, an enjoyment of a certain kind of interaction, is seen in sports, underlying the motivations of competition, self-improvement, a winning score, or even the large material reward for some individuals in professional sports. Anyone participating in such an activity more for fame or money will, in an inverse ratio, enjoy it less for its own sake.

The originating motivation for an aesthetically-based activity is, then, pleasure, the pleasure of action, the pleasure of response within a particular situation. This pleasure is so basic to our human functioning that its delights are observed from the simplest to the most sophisticated of human activity.

The Interactive Nature of the Aesthetic Mode

A third characteristic of the aesthetic mode of functioning is its interactive quality. Stacking blocks, placing stones in a stream, painting the representation of a house, and creating a chemical formula are all interactive processes. This interaction is at the heart of what has often been expressed as an apparent dualism, almost a paradox: the making and discovering of meaning.

Our conventional sense of "discover," after all, is that one finds something, such as the Pacific Ocean, which was there before one found it. To "make" something, on the other hand, suggests a bridge or a painting which did not exist, except as inchoate material, before it was made. The two words seem antithetical, yet they are the forces involved in our primal, aesthetic interaction with the world, whether in the discoveries of science and art, the play of

children, or the act of human perception.

Let me return to the child building with blocks. He or she is experiencing a power to stack them, an ability to grasp one block and place it on top of another, even an ability to gradually perceive the fit of block upon block that will accord with gravity and balance. But, precisely because of gravity and balance, the blocks have their own power; they fall or do not fall according to properties which they themselves possess. The child is experiencing both the power to stack blocks and the blocks' power to be stacked. The child is, thus, not simply giving meaning or form to the world, nor receiving meaning and form from it; the child is engaged in an interaction with the environment that is an integration of both the child's and the world's power at one and the same time. Any particular stack of blocks, then, is a form which has been both made and discovered.

Although one might think such a block-building activity might be characterized as scientific rather than aesthetic because it deals with a trial-and-error arrangement of known properties such as weight and balance rather than the more fluid potential of artistic media such as paint, the distinction would be false. The aesthetic mode is prior to and fundamental for the diverse activities of science and art. Gravity is no more a property of solid cubes in a physics experiment than it is of dance, and no more a property of either than it is of any young child's attempts to stand up, the presence of the human body standing in the world.

Similar to the stack of blocks, my dam in a mountain stream is an interaction between myself and nature, an integration of what I can do with rocks and water and the power and qualities of rocks and water themselves. This interaction appears seamless; it is so fine a web of action and response between myself and the force of the rushing water that it defies separation. How can we separate the water backing up behind a rock from the rock I place there to back up the water? So integrated is this phenomenon that it merits the term which phenomenology has given it: an interpenetration of the self and the world. For these philosophers, to apprehend something out there in the world is a going-out to it, an interpenetration in which meaning is simultaneously created and perceived. In such abstract language, this concept may sound abstruse and only philosophical; in William Butler Yeat's question, "How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" it may sound only poetical; yet observed in the actual experience, with a child, a stone, and a stream, we can see these phrases as totally realistic descriptions.

This interpenetration of an individual with the world is commonplace in discussions of the aesthetic mode. Dewey, in Art as Experience, characterizes the aesthetic mode as a process in which "the self acts as well as undergoes." (Dewey, 246) The young boy swinging around a post or exploring the rising curbing beside the building is acting upon his environment at the same that he is forced to respond to it. He chooses to walk with one foot on the curbing and one on the ground, to see how far he can go, to act upon that passive bit of nature; at the same time he undergoes the fact that his left foot rises while his right foot stays on the level, causing his step to get higher and higher until it is physically impossible to continue.

Cobb refers to this interactiveness as engagement, a coming together of the self and the world, and it seems to me essentially the same as Ross' characterization of the aesthetic drive: that which both makes and discovers at the same time.

The child with a hand out the car window is experiencing the power of the human body and the power of the rushing wind simultaneously, and whether this activity is a momentary piece of play or the beginning of a study in aerodynamics, it is an aesthetic activity by virtue of its interaction between the self and the environment.

We can see this same phenomenon of interaction in less physical activities as well. The current writing-as-process approach has as its fundamental assumption that writing is both the creating and discovering of meaning. This helps us to understand the apparent paradox in a statement by John Updike, emphasis mine: "Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying." It helps us to understand poet William Stafford's comment that writing is a process which brings about "new things" the writer would not have thought of "if he had not started to say them." Writing, then, is neither the copying down of the contents of the brain nor a neutral, uninvolved description of that which is outside the brain. One is, in the process of writing, always in that present moment of interaction between the self and the world of language, idea, and thing.

Our environment seems to beg for our human interaction. A stone, to a child, represents multitude possibilities of action: to be skipped, collected, thrown, added to a pile. These qualities are a combination of the child's desire to do something with the stone and the stone's qualities that allow such "doing." This is the fundamental fact that supports, and even explains, Merleau-Ponty's comment about the painter: that those actions which seem to us to belong to the painter seem, to the painter, "to emanate from the things themselves." (Merleau-Ponty, 167) The trees, for example, in a landscape seem to demand, to emanate, the way in which they should be treated by a particular artist. Our response to nature is both an acting-on and an under-going, whether we are considering child play or a Cezanne painting.

The Expressive Nature of the Aesthetic Mode

It follows from the earlier discussion that such activity as we have been talking about is both universal to human beings and particular to the individual. As we choose activities and as we perform them, we are contributing our individual beings to that interaction; we make our mark on it. Not every child would build a dam; some would skip rocks and some simply throw them into the stream, while others would try for distance or, attracted by the aesthetic properties of stones themselves, turn away from the stream and begin a collection of flat ones or white ones. Thus, what any individual does in response to a given piece of the environment embodies, in that particular moment, that person's being. The choice of activities and the manner in which they are carried out--or, one could say, the content and form of the activity--show a person's "style" in the most general sense of the word.

Now, other attempts to "read" people's expressiveness occur across a wide range of activities in our

culture. From books on "Body Language" to the symptoms of the newly discovered Type-A personality, we are accustomed to categories of "style" based upon the content and form of a person's activities. These are general categories, of course, and such generalized constellations of behavior--useful or not to social scientists and psychologists--are rarely helpful to the educator who works with individual children.

Let me point out, then, that in reading a child's expressiveness in an activity, or in a piece of art or writing, we are concerned with the existential uniqueness of that work and that child. We are not in any way attempting to add new categories to a diagnostic or developmental model. As we read children's writing and looked at their art, we were describing, examining, and reflecting upon it to discover what it "was" and to react to the particular "style" of that child present in the work.

In dealing with a work of art such as a drawing or piece of creative writing, and attempting to discover its expressiveness and the expressiveness of its maker, we must begin with an important concept. Without it, "readings" of expressiveness will degenerate into mere speculation, subjective impressionism, or one or another of the forms of diagnosticizing which plague the field. In order to understand how an individual expresses him or herself in a work, we must first understand the expressiveness of the work itself. In a very important sense, an aesthetic work expresses nothing except itself.

The mainstream of contemporary aesthetic thought has affirmed the autonomous nature of the aesthetic object, and any attempts to observe and reflect on expressiveness must recognize that autonomy. Suzanne Langer calls such works "non-discursive," works not having an abstractable meaning; they do not speak about something else, then--they are.

Please bear in mind that I am speaking of such works as aesthetic objects. A novel can speak of actual social conditions and even have the effect of arousing public action to change those conditions, but such qualities are, whatever their benefits, non-aesthetic. The aesthetic object communicates aesthetic knowledge through aesthetic means, and no such art is reduceable to paraphrase or analysis.

In looking at a child's drawing or writing as an aesthetic object, one must find the point at which the work expresses itself entirely, having its own meaning and effect. Its mode of existence--again, as an aesthetic object--is this autonomous unity of what it is and what it means, on its own terms.

Nevertheless, keeping the autonomous nature of the work firmly in mind, it is possible to discern connections between the work, the creator, and the viewer. The self of the artist is, indeed, "in there" somewhere.

The artist, in Merleau-Ponty's view, "speaks both of himself and his world as an unbreakable whole" (Kwant, 35) so that the self can be perceived at one with the work and the world thus presented. Bennet Reimers, the noted music and aesthetics educator, in A Philosophy of Music Education, points out that although the meaning of a work lies in its aesthetic qualities, they are "the qualities of which all human experience is made" (Reimers, 25), and thus they are available to us through our own human experience.

Suzanne Langer's phrase is, to me, the most memorable. Art is connected to the artist but not in the sense of being a "symptom": art is not "self-expressive" in the way that a baby's crying is self-expressive. The artist, says Langer, is not expressing his own feelings, "but rather what he knows of human feeling." (Langer, 26)

Thus, we may look at a child's aesthetic work as an autonomous work embodying its own significance and still see it as expressive of what that child knows about human feeling, about the world, about his or her own experience of life.

This is an absolutely crucial distinction for those of us working with children. While it would be a mistake to consider a child's work as a neutral arrangement of formal objects unconnected with life, the more common error made by teachers and other adults, including students preparing to be teachers, is to see the work as "self-expressive" in a simple, one-to-one sense. In this way, one must be extremely careful in saying "A child expresses him or herself in art." Unexamined and undefined, this statement can lead to amateur diagnostics of the worst kind.

This fallacy is seen often enough in the reactions of many people to adult art. It may be heard in the negative or joking comment as in "He must really be crazy," said about an apparently chaotic piece, or "She must have been having a bad day."

I was once interviewed by a local journalist on the publication of a small chapbook of my poems. The reporter had been so struck by what she considered the pessimistic tone of some poems--"depressing," was her phrase--that she continually interrupted the interview to remark upon the frequency of my smiles and my apparently affable, humorous nature.

I was similarly struck by the American artist Hopper's comment on a painting of his which, to an interviewer, signified Hopper's obsession with loneliness. The real point of that picture, Hopper said, was an attempt to portray light on the several places of a starkly presented house.

This fallacy of expression as symptom has a long and rich tradition in the general public's approach to art, and the aesthetic investigator must avoid this for the interpretive error it is. This tendency is particularly harmful when applied to children since they are more "subject to" our interpretations than adult artists. It could hardly have mattered to Picasso that some viewer in America thought his cubist paintings represented the artist's psychotic state; it would certainly matter to a child whose work a teacher or other adult was commenting upon.

A similar error is seen in the schoolish approach of interpretation, focusing on what the artist or writer--in what, to me, is one of the most hideous phrases of the interpretive textbook--"was trying to say." This approach regards the work of art as, at best, a message and, at worst, a symptom. "What do you think the artist thinks about war?" the misleading guide may ask of the circle of children in a museum, and the answer, looking at a painting which aesthetically conveys horror and terror, is obviously, "He doesn't like it." I hope the fallacy here is self-evident by now. One does not spend hours, let alone days or months, on a painting in order to convey to an audience the opinion that war is bad.

We have worked with students and teachers who would quickly interpret the drawing of a burning house, for example, as self-expressive of some anxiety, some trauma, some "real" fear. One must remember the presence of aesthetic and artistic play, first of all. One must have, or remember, enough experience of art to realize that some children are simply fascinated by the gorgeous blending of yellow, orange, and red, "fire" being one of the few conventional opportunities to so experiment with these neighboring hues. Assuming that the drawing does embody "fear," we are not often sure whether the child is motivated by a real fear such as a recent fire in his/her home, an anxiety fear, or a neutral "making up" of a fearsome picture. One thing we can be sure of from regarding a "fearful" picture: it tells us what the child knows and feels about the human emotion of fear.

One of our students in a group project quickly interpreted a threatening monster in a child's painting as an indication that the child was morbidly fearful of such creatures that had power over him. It was difficult for her to see that a child drawing a strong monster could also be participating in that monster's strength, a power which the child, after all, had under his control; he could have "killed" the monster right there by drawing a larger, stronger one or even tearing up the painting. The point in looking for expressiveness in such a picture is that whether child fears or reveres or is bored with monsters, the picture shows something of what the child knows about monsters; it is expressive of that child's "perspective" on the subject.

I will never forget my first, and perhaps strongest, lesson from Patricia Carini. We had examined a child's paintings for hours, noting the theme of "doubleness"--balanced paintings, two figures, double-doors, and the like. We entered into this bipartite world of the child and the work, appreciating and learning about the child and ourselves in the process. Later, someone discovered from accompanying notes that the child was a twin and there was extreme irritation in the group I belonged to--myself included--that we had not been given this piece of data, information which Carini certainly possessed. I didn't see her before I left the building and I was frustrated with my irritation all on my own, the answer struggling to emerge. It took a day, I believe, before I realized that if we had been told the child was a twin, we would have said, "Oh, that explains why she has two figures all the time," and that would have been the end of our exploration; indeed, our exploration would have never occurred, and we would neither have experienced nor understood the paintings in their individual richness. What is most to be avoided in "reading" children's works is this tendency to assume a helpless, symptomatic "self-expression" on the part of the child and the art.

I hope the reader will realize that I am not saying a work of art has no emotional effect in its aesthetic qualities, or that the theme and style of a piece of writing or art does not express the themes and style of the child in the world. The Hopper painting I mentioned does strike one as intensely lonely, and some of my poems, if not pessimistic, are "moody." The house on fire in a child's painting may exude fear and weakness in the presence of such destruction or the potential for violence in the figure of a monster. Nevertheless, Hopper is not necessarily lonely, I am not pessimistic, and the child may be no more "afraid" of fire than any of

the rest of us. Our works show, not our feelings, but what we know of feelings.

Conclusion

I am aware that I have not presented what we have been doing in examining children's works of writing and art, nor have I given examples of our process. It seemed important, first, to supply a rationale for even approaching children's work as aesthetic and expressive. Suffice it to say here, that we find consistent and richly unfolding worlds in a child's work, and that the child's "style of being" in the world is evident from both the subject matter and the style of particular works. One child approaches human figures and houses with the same airy energy, lightly dashing the weather across a dynamic sky. Another child paints as if she were building the house, its broad, thick foundation secure enough to hold the stable geometry of its upper portion while on each side stand three identical trees as sturdy as concrete pillars. One child develops an interest in interiors and detail; another child seems to be traveling a map as he embodies half a dozen different locations on the two-dimensional plane of paper. The North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation has published one example of Carini's reflective observation, School Lives, and readers interested in seeing her approach in detail should consult that work. We are certainly indebted to it and to her.

What, then, are some implications we can draw from what I have presented here?

Since a child's works, like our own, are self-expressive in the way I have described, we can know something of what that child knows by observing and reacting and reflecting on his or her products and actions. We can see in the content and form of a child's work and play the expression of his or her "style" in interacting with the world, and we are violating neither the child's secrets of self nor the world of the art object as an autonomous entity.

Since a child's works, like our own, are aesthetic, they are tied to our basic human mode of perception and cognition. They are, thus, a combination of playfulness and seriousness, and they need to be taken as such by the concerned adult: playfully, to avoid following pre-conceptions, symbolic trails, and a foolish pomposity; seriously to avoid trivializing the child's work, dismissing it, or quickly categorizing it.

Since a child's works, like our own, are both aesthetic and expressive, showing us that child's style of interacting with the world, they are valuable insights to both the child and the world for the classroom teacher, and time and space need to be provided to enlarge the opportunities children have in school to engage in this activity. A quiz or worksheet tests a child's knowledge about a tiny fraction of one kind of limited knowledge. Observing and reflecting on a child's aesthetic/expressive work, tests, in the sense of "proves," the child's whole being in the world.

It is a joy to realize we are working with whole children in a whole world and it is a relief to realize how natural and spontaneous and pleasurable this aesthetic functioning is. It is, finally, awe-provoking to realize that we are working with the fundamental mode of human functioning, a stream of aesthetic activity that offers us a unity of work and play, of art and science, of making and discovering

meaning that underlies our human activity of perceiving and constructing the world.

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